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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAKU 000625

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SUBJECT: A MIXED REPORT CARD FOR AZERBAIJAN'S NEW PARLIAMENT

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Jason P. Hyland per 1.4 (b,d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Azerbaijan's new parliament has a mixed record, almost five months into its work. While information from the leadership and pro-governmental MPs indicates the legislative body will function more transparently (including possibly incorporating a version of public comment into some bills), reality to date suggests the changes are slow in coming. Minority party MPs appear to face traditional problems with access to information and a limited ability to speak on the floor of Parliament. In particular, five MPs from the former opposition Azadliq Bloc have said they are allotted insufficient time to discuss their legislative agendas. Despite this, we hope to build upon the small opening that seems to have emerged through a new USG-funded parliamentary assistance program. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) In an April 12 meeting with emboffs, opposition Musavat Party Member of Parliament Iltizam Akbarli complained that Parliament's leadership is actively preventing minority party MPs from speaking. Minority parties -- lacking the requisite 25 members to constitute a faction -- do not have the ability to put items on the parliament's agenda. As a result, their only opportunity to raise issues is 30-minute "miscellaneous business" sessions at the end of each parliamentary working day. However, because parliament is meeting only twice a week and the time allotted to each MP for miscellaneous business has been reduced from 10 minutes to just five, Akbarli said that the opposition MPs are being squeezed even from this limited forum. He reported that the leadership consistently does not recognize minority party MPs during the miscellaneous business sessions. Gudrat Hasanguliyev, a second-term MP from the "Classics" Popular Front Party (a nominal opposition party that in fact more closely represents GOAJ views), echoed these concerns in an April 17 conversation with Pol/Econ chief. Hasanguliyev said he also has been unable to speak during the miscellaneous business sessions and is frustrated that the leadership was not recognizing minority MPs.

¶3. (C) A survey of the four Musavat MPs, Azadliq Bloc MP Panah Huseynov, and Umid leader Igbal Agazadeh revealed similar stories. It appears that the staunch opposition is increasingly being marginalized in Parliament. In addition to not being recognized, some opposition MPs complain that they physically have been unable to speak, as the microphones in their row were destroyed. They also appear to be out of the loop on information. A new independent MP outside of the leadership ranks confidently told us that every MP would soon be allocated a staff member; none of our opposition contacts was aware of this development.

¶4. (C) In order to increase its ability to operate in Parliament, Akbarli said that Musavat is trying to change the parliamentary rules of procedures to lower the number of members required to form a faction from 25 to five, Musavat's current representation in Parliament. Akbarli said that

Musavat MPs had raised their concerns in several meetings with the Speaker of Parliament, but were not hopeful that the Speaker would address their concerns. He added that Huseynov has been so frustrated by the opposition's inability to speak in Parliament that he is considering resigning. (Huseynov, a former Prime Minister, is widely considered the most radical MP, known for his flamboyant speeches in public fora. His threat, if accurately reported by Akbarli, is credible).

15. (C) Akbarli fretted that his inability to raise issues for discussion in Parliament would hurt his political future. Akbarli said he is meeting regularly with constituents in his Imishli district. His constituents, he said, are counting on him to deliver jobs and economic prosperity to his largely agricultural southern district on the border of Iran. In a recent meeting, 40 of 100 constituents present asked Akbarli for help in finding jobs. Akbarli also bemoaned the lack of resources available to MPs to conduct research or prepare initiatives. Without personal staff or even a computer, MPs most rely on four outdated computers in Parliament's library to do their work. Akbarli said that Huseynov recently purchased a computer from his personal funds so the opposition MPs would be able to work at parliament. (Huseynov, with his four Musavat colleagues, have formed an informal fraction, spearheaded by each MP on a monthly, rotating basis). Only parliamentary commission heads and their deputies currently have computers. Speaker of Parliament Ogtay Asadov told Ambassador he planned to upgrade Parliament's infrastructure, including giving every MP his or her own office and own computer, but progress appears slow to date.

16. (C) In spite of the opposition's negative comments, our discussions with other MPs indicate that the new Parliament encompasses a younger, fresher crowd than its predecessor.

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From our discussions with the leadership of the Parliament, the legislative body appears poised to take a more reform-minded view towards legislation as well. Several MPs have told us about the need to reform old laws to conform with Western standards and at least one member of the leadership appears willing to attach amendments to legislation drafted by the President's Office after consulting with relevant outside parties. A varied group of MPs (including several pro-government politicians) told CODEL Kolbe on April 12 that the Parliament absolutely needed more training so that it could function more independently. We hope to address some of these needs through a new parliamentary assistance program to build on this momentum and help transform Parliament into an effective, empowered institution.

HYLAND